

GUMSHOE

rules system



THE GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM

THIS CHAPTER DESCRIBES THE BASIC GUMSHOE RULES SYSTEM AND IS ADDRESSED TO PLAYERS AND GM ALIKE. BUT FIRST BEAR WITH US FOR A LITTLE EXPLANATORY THEORY.

Why This Game Exists

Investigative scenarios have been done wrong since the early days of roleplaying games. As a consequence, they're hard to run and prone to grind to a halt. GUMSHOE is here to fix all that.

What's wrong about the traditional way of doing investigative games? They're based on a faulty premise. Story-based roleplaying, of which investigative games were an early if not the earliest example, evolved from dungeon-bashing campaigns. They treat clues the same way that dungeon games treat treasure. You have to search for the clue that takes you on to the next scene. If you roll well, you get the clue. If not, you don't—and the story grinds to a halt.

However, treasure gathering isn't the main event in a dungeon game. There, the central activity is killing the monsters and enemies who live in the dungeon. The treasure-finding phase comes afterwards, as a mere reward. If you don't get all the treasure in a room, you lose out a bit, but the story keeps going, as you tromp down the hallway to the next monster-filled chamber.

Imagine a dungeon game where you always had to roll well to find another room to plunder, or sit around feeling frustrated and bored.

In a fictional procedural, whether it's a mystery novel or an episode of a cop show, the emphasis isn't on finding the clues in the first place. When it really matters, you may get a paragraph telling you how difficult the search was, or a montage of a CSI team tossing an apartment. But the action really starts after the clues are gathered.

INVESTIGATIVE SCENARIOS ARE NOT ABOUT FINDING CLUES,
THEY'RE ABOUT INTERPRETING THE CLUES YOU DO FIND.

GUMSHOE, therefore, makes the finding of clues all but automatic, as long as you get to the right place in the story and have the right ability. That's when the fun part begins, when the players try to put the components of the puzzle together.

That's hard enough for a group of armchair detectives, without withholding half the pieces from them.

Mystery Structure

Every investigative scenario begins with a crime or conspiracy committed by a group of antagonists. The bad guys do something bad. The player characters must figure out who did it and put a stop to their activities.

If you use the GUMSHOE rules for straight-up crime drama, the team investigates a crime, finds out who did it, and puts the culprits under arrest.

In the Esoterrorist setting, the team investigates an occult conspiracy, finds out who did it and why, and takes action to end the occult manifestations. They may detain or kill the Esoterrorists behind it. They may destroy any supernatural creatures or effects generated by the conspiracy. Or they might turn over the information gained in their investigation to a specialized Ordo Veritatis clean-up team, who ruthlessly and efficiently dispose of the guilty parties and their workings.

Your GM designs each scenario by creating an investigation trigger, a sinister conspiracy, and a trail of clues.

THE INVESTIGATION TRIGGER

This is the event, often a gruesome crime, that attracts the attention of the Ordo Veritatis, resulting in the initiation of an investigation. Examples:

- The discovery of a murder victim, obviously slain during a ritualistic killing.
- The discovery of a corpse slain by supernatural means, perhaps by a creature.
- Sightings of supernatural creatures or phenomena.
- The apparently mundane death of an Ordo Veritatis member or ally.

THE SINISTER CONSPIRACY

This sets out who the bad guys are, what they've done so far, what they're trying to do, and how the investigation trigger fits into the overall scheme. The GM also determines what has to happen to prevent the plot from going forward. This, unknown to the players, is their victory condition — what they have to do to thwart the bad guys and bring the story to a positive conclusion.

Once the GM has the logic of the story worked out from the villain's point of view, she then thinks in reverse, designing a **trail of clues** leading from the investigation trigger to an understanding of the sinister plot and its players, sufficient to get to work destroying it.

Optionally, the GM may also plan a series of **antagonist reactions**. These lay out what the bad guys do when they find out that they're being investigated. The GM determines what conditions trigger them, and what the antagonists attempt to do. These may include further crimes, giving the team more to investigate. They may try to destroy evidence, hinder the investigation by planting false leads, or to intimidate or dispose of potential witnesses, including accomplices they no longer trust. They may attack the investigators. Foolish, overconfident or risk-taking antagonists may take them on directly. Clever antagonists will strike from a distance, taking great pains to cover their tracks.

From Structure To Story

The GM's structure notes are not a story. The story occurs as you, the team of players, brings the structure to life through the actions of your characters. The story proceeds from scene to scene, where you determine the pace, discovering clues and putting them together. Your characters interact with locations, gathering physical evidence, and supporting characters run by the GM, gathering expert and eyewitness testimony.

The first scene presents the mystery you have to solve. You then perform legwork, collecting information that tells you more about the case. Each scene contains information pointing to a new scene. Certain scenes may put a new twist on the investigation, as the initial mystery turns out to be just one aspect of a much bigger story. As clues accumulate, a picture of the case emerges, until your characters arrive at a climactic scene, where all is revealed and the bad guys confronted. A wrap-up scene accounts for loose ends and shows the consequences of your success — or, in rare instances, failure. (Why is failure possible at all? Its possibility creates urgency and suspense.)

To move from scene to scene, and to solve the overall mystery, you must gather clues. They fuel your forward momentum.

Gathering Clues

Gathering clues is simple. All you have to do is: 1) get yourself into a scene where relevant information can be gathered and 2) have the right ability to discover the clue and 3) tell the GM that you're using it. As long as you do these three things, you will

Mundane MYSTERIES

The scenario structure given in the main text assumes you're using the Esoterror background, or a similar setting of occult investigation. Ordinary crime dramas may call for a simpler structure. The bad guys could still be furthering a sinister plot, or they may be doing nothing after committing the triggering crime other than hoping that the investigators don't catch up with them. In this case there is no ongoing conspiracy to disrupt. To achieve victory and bring the scenario to a successful conclusion, the investigators need merely prove their case against the criminals. The climactic scene might involve wringing a confession from the wrongdoer, or provoking him into revealing the crucial bit of evidence which will ensure his conviction.

Tip For Players: Containing Speculation

Investigative scenarios often bog down into speculative debate between players about what could be happening. Many things can be happening, but only one thing is. If more than one possible explanation ties together the clues you have so far, you need more clues. Whenever you get stuck, get out and gather more information.



never fail to gain a piece of necessary information. It is never dependent on a die roll. If you ask for it, you will get it.

You can specify exactly what you intend to achieve: "I use Textual Analysis to determine if the memo was really written by Danziger."

Or you can engage in a more general informational fishing expedition: "I use Evidence Collection to search the crime scene."

If your suggested action corresponds to a clue in the scenario notes, the GM provides you the information arising from the clue.

Intrepid investigator Stig Thompson is on the trail of a roving tribe of high-tech cannibals. He searches a section of forested land off the highway for evidence of their presence. His player, Justin, says, "I put my video camera in infrared mode and scan the area for heat traces." This is all he needs to do to get the information he needs to proceed to the next scene, a confrontation with the cannibals in their encampment. "Blobs of heat energy pop up to your right, about a hundred yards away. It looks like there's four or five people, appearing and disappearing behind a barrier."

For each scene, the GM designates a **core clue**. This is the clue you absolutely need to move to the next scene, and thus to complete the entire investigation. GMs will avoid making core clues available only with the use of obscure investigative abilities. (For that matter, the character creation system is set up so that the group as a whole will have access to all, or nearly all, of these abilities.)

Certain clues allow you to gain special benefits by spending points from the relevant investigative ability pool. During your first few scenarios, your GM will offer you the opportunity to spend additional points as you uncover these clues. After that it's up to you to ask if there's anything to be gained by spending extra time or effort on a given clue. You can even propose specific ways to improve your already good result; if your suggestion is persuasive or entertaining, the GM may award you a special benefit not mentioned in her scenario notes.

Each benefit costs either 1 or 2 points from the relevant pool, depending on the difficulty of the additional action and the scope of the reward. When asking you if you want to purchase the benefit, the GM always tells you how much it will cost. Additional information gained provides flavor, but is never required to solve the case or move on to a new scene. Often it makes the character seem clever, powerful, or heroic. It may grant you benefits useful later in the scenario, frequently by making a favorable impression on supporting characters. The benefit may be helpful in arranging the veil-out, the all-important Ordo Veritatis cover-up undertaken at the conclusion of an investigation into the supernatural. It may allow you to leap forward into the story by gaining a clue that would otherwise only become apparent in a later scene. On occasion, the additional information adds an emotional dimension to the story or ties into the character's past history or civilian life. If you think of your GUMSHOE game as a TV series, an extra benefit gives the actor playing your character a juicy spotlight scene.

"Can I tell what kind of barrier they're behind?" asks Justin. The GM knows that it's the cannibals' tricked-out recreational vehicle. This information isn't necessary to move forward, and in fact Stig will stumble across it in a moment if he keeps going toward the cannibal camp. But it would be mighty impressive, in a Sherlock Holmes kind of way, if he could answer that question now.

"Do you want to spend a Photography point?" asks the GM. Justin agrees, and reduces his pool from its maximum of 3, down to 2. Justin has already established that in Stig's civilian life, he's an electronics freak and rabid early adopter who pays for his gear with a variety of oddball freelance gigs. This gives the GM an opening to justify Stig's impressive insight, while also giving him a distinctive character moment.

The GM explains as follows: "The contours are unmistakably familiar to you from the time when you were hired to shoot footage at the New Mexico RV Show. It's a luxury motor home, a 2006 Patriot from Beaver Motor Coaches. You remember the price tag on one of those puppies. Over three hundred grand."

Stig whistles through his teeth. "These aren't your father's hillbilly cannibal cultists," he says.

Spending points on benefits gives you an edge at the end of the scenario, when you are awarded points to improve your character. Thus it is to your advantage to propose cool benefits to the GM, even when they aren't specified in the scenario.

The act of spending points for benefits is called a **spend**. The GM's scenario notes may specify that you get Benefit X for a 1-point spend, or Benefit Y for a 2-point spend. GMs of great mental agility who feel comfortable granting their players influence over the details of the narrative may allow them to specify the details of a special benefit. If you wish to make a spend in a situation where the GM has no special benefit to offer you, and cannot think of one that pertains at all to the investigation, you do not lose the points you wish to spend.

Inconspicuous Clues

Sometimes the characters instinctively notice something without actively looking for it. Often this situation occurs in places they're moving through casually and don't regard as scenes in need of intensive searching. The team might pass by a concealed door, spot a droplet of blood on the marble of an immaculate hotel lobby, or approach a vehicle with a bomb planted beneath it. Interpersonal abilities can also be used to find inconspicuous clues. The classic example is of a character whose demeanor or behavioral tics establish them as suspicious.

It's unreasonable to expect players to ask to use their various abilities in what appears to be an innocuous transitional scene. Otherwise they'd have to spend minutes of game time with every change of scene, running down their abilities in obsessive checklist fashion. That way madness lies.

Instead the GM asks which character has the highest current pool in the ability in question. (When in doubt for what ability to use for a basic search, the GM defaults to Evidence Collection.)

If two or more pools are equal, it goes to the one with the highest rating. If ratings are also equal, their characters find the clue at the same time.

Stig visits the hospital to get his lip stitched up after a scuffle with a young cannibal. His pal Mitchell Blunt waits with him. The doctor in the ER is a cannibal, too, and intends to drug Stig and have him hauled off to his favorite butcher's shop. The GM decides that the Forensic Psychology ability will alert them to a sense of predatory anticipation underlying the doctor's wearily professional demeanor. Both characters have the skill; Stig has 2 points in his pool, while Mitchell has 3.

"Mitchell," says the GM, "you can't put your finger on it, but there's something hinky about the doctor. He's got what Shakespeare would call a lean and hungry look."

TESTS

A test occurs when the outcome of an ability use is in doubt. Tests apply to general skills only. Unlike information gathering attempts, tests carry a fairly high chance of failure. They may portend dire consequences if you lose, provide advantages if you win, or both.

Even in the case of general skills, the GM should call for tests only at dramatically important points in the story, and for tasks of exceptional difficulty. Most general ability uses should allow automatic successes, with possible bonuses on point spends, just like investigative abilities.

There are two types of test: simple tests and contests.

Simple Tests

A simple test occurs when the character attempts an action without active resistance from another person or entity. Examples include driving a treacherous road, jumping a gorge, sneaking into an unguarded building, binding a wound, shooting a target, disconnecting a security system, or remaining sane in the face of creeping supernatural horror.

The GM determines how hard any given action is by assigning it a Difficulty Number ranging from 2 to 8, where 2 offers only a slim chance of failure and 8 verges on the impossible. The player rolls a single die; if the result is equal to or higher than the Difficulty Number, the character succeeds. Before rolling the die, the player may choose to spend any number of points from the relevant ability pool, adding these to the final die result. Players who forget to specify the number of points they want to spend before rolling are stuck with the unmodified result.

In the game world, expenditure of pool points in this way represents special effort and concentration by the character, the kind you can muster only so many times during the course of an investigation.

Stig wants to climb a high wall to see if Unremitting Horrors lurk on the other side. The GM needs the group to get to the other side of the wall and therefore assigns the relatively low Difficulty Number of 3 to the task. Stig's player, Justin, has a full 8 points in his Athletics pool. He decides that he really needs a win on this one and decides to spend half of them on the attempt. He rolls a 5. With the 4 points from his pool, this gets a final result of 9. Displaying impressive aerobic grace, Stig hauls himself over the wall.

Die Rolls

All die rolls in GUMSHOE use a single ordinary (six-sided) die.



The Esoterrorists setting is meant to be straight-up and brutal horror game. Losing points is meant to hurt. To truly evoke that spirit, the GM never reveals Difficulty Numbers.

GMs running GUMSHOE in non-horror environments, or who wish to water down the setting's intentional level of oppressive nastiness, may choose to reveal Difficulties.

The test represents the character's best chance to succeed. Once you fail, you've shot your wad and cannot retry unless you take some other supporting action that would credibly increase your odds of success. If allowed to do this, you must spend more pool points than you did on the previous attempt. If you can't afford it, you can't retry.

Mitchell has just failed his Mechanics test to repair a broken pump in the sinking ship he and the other investigators are trapped in. He spent 2 points from his Mechanics pool on this attempt. The GM decides he'll have one more shot at it before the ship capsizes. Now he must spend at least 3 Mechanics points. Fortunately he has 4 points left in his pool. The Difficulty Number of the repair attempt is 5. Mitchell rolls a 6, adding 3 points to get a final result of 9. The pump kicks back in, just in time to reverse the ship's sinking.

Difficulty Numbers and Story Pacing

Just as the GUMSHOE system keeps the story moving by making all crucial clues accessible to the characters, GMs must ensure that tests and contests essential to forward narrative momentum can be easily overcome. Assign relatively low Difficulty Numbers of 4 or less to these crucial plot points. Reserve especially hard Difficulty Numbers for obstacles which provide interesting but nonessential benefits.

For example, if the characters have to sneak into the cannibal campground in order to stage the final confrontation, assign the relatively low Difficulty Number of 4 to the task. If it seems to the characters that they ought to have a tougher time of it, insert a detail justifying their ease of success. The cannibal assigned to patrol duty might be found passed out at his post, say.

PIGGYBACKING

When a group of characters act in concert to perform a task together, they designate one to take the lead. That character makes a simple test, spending any number of his own pool points toward the task, as usual. All other characters pay 1 point from their relevant pools in order to gain the benefits of the leader's action. These points are not added to the leader's die result. For every character who is unable to pay this piggybacking cost, either because he lacks pool points or does not have the ability at all, the Difficulty Number of the attempt increases by 2.

Stig, Mitchell, Lauren and Yoriko attempt to sneak into the Uffizi Gallery in Florence to perform tests on the famous Botticelli painting Primavera. Lauren, with an Infiltration of 8, takes the lead. Stig, Mitchell and Yoriko have 2, 0, and 4 points in their Infiltration pools, respectively. Stig and Yoriko pay 1 point apiece; their pools go down to 1 and 3. Because Mitchell has no points to spend, the Difficulty Number of the Infiltration increases from 4 to 6. (If the group left him behind, it would be easier to sneak in, but he's the one with the Art History degree.) Lauren spends 3 points on the attempt and rolls a 1. This would have overcome the Difficulty if it wasn't for Mitchell's presence. Clearly, he's stumbled on his way into the gallery, setting off the infrared sensors.

In most instances a group cannot logically act in concert. Only one character can drive a car at one time. Two characters with Preparedness check their individual kits in sequence, rather than checking a single kit at the same time.

COOPERATION

When two characters cooperate toward a single goal, they agree which of them is undertaking the task directly, and which is assisting. The leader may spend any number of points from her pool, adding them to the die roll. The assistant may pay any number of points from his pool. All but one of these is applied to the die roll.

Stig and Mitchell are trying to repair a badly damaged old motorcycle so they can escape on it before the members of a Baghdad militia show up to kill them. Stig has 3 points left in his Mechanics pool. Mitchell has 2 points. They decide that Stig is the main mechanic, and Mitchell his assistant. Both choose to spend all of their remaining points on the attempt. Stig adds 3 points to the die roll. Mitchell spends 2 points, but adds only 1 to the die roll. Stig's player rolls a 3, for a result of 7. This beats the Difficulty Number of 6, allowing them to zoom away on the back of the bike as semi-automatic rounds ping all around them.

Contests

Contests occur when two characters, often a player character and a supporting character controlled by the GM, actively attempt to thwart one another. Although contests can resolve various physical match-ups, in a horror game the most common contest is the chase, in which the investigators run away from slavering entities intent on ripping them limb from limb.

In a contest, each character acts in turn. The first to fail a roll of the contested ability loses. The GM decides who acts first. In a chase, the character who bolts from the scene acts first. Where the characters seem to be acting at the same time, the one with the lowest rating in the relevant ability acts first. In the event of a tie, supporting characters act before player characters. In the event of a tie between player characters, the player who arrived last for the current session goes first in the contest.

The first character to act makes a test of the ability in question. If he fails, he loses the contest. If he succeeds, the second character then makes a test. This continues until one character loses, at which point the other one wins.

Typically each character attempts to beat a Difficulty Number of 4.

Stig flees through an abandoned mall from a chainsaw-wielding cultist. His Athletics pool is 6; the cultist's is 7. As the fleeing character initiating the chase sequence, he's the first character to act. He rolls against a Difficulty of 4, spending 1 point. He rolls a 4, and manages to scramble toward the food court. The cultist spends 1 point as well, rolling a 3. He slides along the polished floor, revving his chainsaw.

Stig spends another point, taking his Athletics to 4. He rolls a 2. That's not enough to get away. Stig has backed himself into a corner, caught between garbage bins emblazoned with the logo of a popular fast food corporation. The cultist advances on him. Now he has no choice but to stand and fight.

Where the odds of success are skewed in favor of one contestant, the GM may assign different Difficulties to each. A character with a significant advantage gets a lower Difficulty Number. A character facing a major handicap faces a higher Difficulty Number. When in doubt, the GM assigns the lower number to the advantaged participant.

An investigator running through a swamp finds it harder to move quickly than the marsh creature pursuing him. In this case he might face a Difficulty Number of 4, while the marsh beast gets the lower Difficulty of 3.

Throughout the contest, GM and players should collaborate to add flavor to each result, explaining what the characters did to remain in the contest. That way, instead of dropping out of the narration to engage in an arithmetical recitation, you keep the fictional world verbally alive.



Exhaustion, Injury and Gruesome Death

Unlike most abilities, your **Health pool can drop below 0**.

When it does this, you must make a Consciousness Roll. Roll a die with the absolute value¹ of your current Health pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself to remain conscious, voluntarily reducing your Health pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Consciousness roll is based on your Health pool before you make this reduction.

Elam Stokes is being chased by condo cultists through the lobby of a swank apartment building. They hit him with a harpoon, dropping his Health pool to -2. He really wants to get away from them, lest they sacrifice him on their altar to conspicuous consumerism. Thus he must remain conscious. The absolute value of -2 is 2, so this is the Difficulty of his Consciousness roll. He chooses to expend another 2 Health points he doesn't have, pushing himself onward toward the revolving doors. That gives him a bonus of 2 to his roll. He rolls a 6, for a final result of 8. Elam gets away, but now his Health pool is down to -4.

If your pool is anywhere from 0 to -5, you are **hurt**, but have suffered no permanent injury, beyond a few superficial cuts and bruises. However the pain of your injuries makes it impossible to spend points on Investigative abilities, and increases the Difficulty Numbers of all tests and contests, including opponents' Hit Thresholds, by 1. A character with the Medic ability can improve your condition by spending Medic points. For every Medic point spent, you regain 2 Health points—unless you are the Medic, in which case you gain only 1 Health point for every Medic point spent. The Medic can only refill your pool to where you were before the incident in which you received this latest injury. He must be in a position to devote all of his attention to directly tending to your wounds.

If your pool is between -6 and -11, you have been seriously **wounded**. You must make a Consciousness roll. Whether or not you maintain consciousness, you are no longer able to fight. Until you receive first aid, you will lose an additional Health point every half hour. A character with the Medic ability can stabilize your condition by spending 2 Medic points. However, he can't restore your Health points. Even after you receive first aid, you must convalesce in a hospital or similar setting for a period of days. Your period of forced inactivity is a number of days equal to the positive value of your lowest Health pool score. (So if you were reduced to -8 Health, you are hospitalized for 8 days.) On the day of your discharge, your Health pool increases to half its maximum value. On the next day, it refreshes fully.

When your pool dips to -12 or below, you are dead. Time to create a replacement character.

¹ In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Health pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.



Fighting

Fights are slightly more complicated contests involving any of the following abilities:

- Scuffling vs. Scuffling: the characters are fighting in close quarters.
- Shooting vs. Shooting: the characters are apart from one another and trying to hit each other with guns or other missile weapons

The aggressor is the first character to move against the other. When the status of aggressor and defender are unclear, the combatants compare their current pool numbers in the abilities they're using in the fight. The character with the highest number chooses whether to act as aggressor or defender. (Unlike an ordinary contest, in a fight it is often advantageous to strike first.)

A contest proceeds between the two abilities. When combatants using the Scuffling or Shooting abilities roll well, they get the opportunity to deal damage to their opponents.

HIT THRESHOLDS

Each character has a Hit Threshold of either 3 (the standard value) or 4 (if the character's Athletics rating is 8 or more.) The Hit Threshold is the Difficulty Number the character's opponent must match or beat in order to harm him. Less competent supporting characters may have lower Hit Thresholds. Creatures may have Hit Thresholds of 4 or higher, regardless of their Athletics ratings.

DEALING DAMAGE

When you roll on or over your opponent's Hit Threshold, you may deal damage to him. To do so, you make a damage roll, rolling a die which is then modified according to the relative lethality of your weapon, as per the following table:

WEAPON TYPE	DAMAGE MODIFIER
FIST, KICK	-2
SMALL IMPROVISED WEAPON, POLICE BATON, KNIFE	-1
MACHETE, HEAVY CLUB, LIGHT FIREARM	0
SWORD, HEAVY FIREARM	+1

For firearms, add an additional +2 when fired at point blank range. Supernatural creatures often exhibit alarmingly high damage modifiers. Characters may never spend points from their combat pools to increase their damage rolls.

The final damage result is then subtracted from your opponent's Health pool. When a combatant's Health pool drops to 0 or less (see sidebar), that combatant collapses from exhaustion and is unable to continue fighting. Any combatants currently engaged with him in a close quarters fight can then deal another instance of damage to him. Unlike other contests, participants do not lose when they fail their test rolls. Instead, they're forced out of the fight when they lose consciousness or become seriously wounded — see sidebar.

Stig is attacked in his own motel room by a slime-dripping creature made of hair, claws, and his own sexual guilt. It leaps on him, making this a close quarters fight, for which the Scuffle ability is required. The GM declares that the creature is the aggressor, since it's come out of nowhere to attack the sleeping Stig. The creature has a Scuffle rating and pool of 12, a Health rating and pool of 10, a Hit Threshold of 4, and a Damage Modifier of 2. Stig's Scuffle rating is 10 but his pool is down to 6. His Health pool is down to 8 from a rating of 12. His Hit Threshold is 4. With no weapons at hand, his Damage Modifier is -2. The GM spends 2 points from the creature's Scuffling pool, dropping it from 12 to 10. The GM rolls, getting a 2. Modified by the point spend, that comes out to a 4, which beats Stig's Hit Threshold. The creature may then make a damage roll. The GM rolls a 4; with his Damage Modifier of 2, that equals 6 points of damage. The creature's rancid claws dig deep into Stig's naked torso, reducing his Health pool from 8 to 2. Stig screams in terror, hoping to summon his teammates, slumbering in the adjoining rooms.

He flails at its shifting visage with white-knuckled fists. His player, Justin, spends 3 points, taking his pool from 6 to 3. He rolls a 3, for a result of 6, which more than meets the creature's Hit Threshold. He therefore deals damage to it. Justin rolls a 5. Combined with his -2 modifier, this comes out to 3 points of damage. The creature's Health pool drops from 10 to 7.

The creature responds by attempting to tear open Stig's abdomen to get at his liver. The GM spends another 2 Scuffle points for the creature, taking its pool from 10 to 8. The roll is high, a 5, which modifies to a 7. The ensuing damage roll is a 2, which the creature's Damage Modifier brings to a total of 4. Stig's Health drops to -2. He is now **hurt**, and suffers an increase of 1 to all Difficulty Numbers, including his opponent's Hit Threshold, which now becomes 5. He must make a Consciousness roll, against a Difficulty of 2, which is the absolute value of his Health pool. He rolls a 3, and remains conscious.

Now it's Stig's turn to hit back. Justin spends 2 points, reducing his pool from 3 to 1. He rolls a 2, for a total of 4. Before he got hurt, that would have been enough, but now he's just short of the mark. He tries to jab his thumbs into two of its eye sockets, but can't exert enough pressure to harm the thing..

The creature attacks again, spending another 2 Scuffle points, taking its total from 8 to 6. The GM rolls a 5, for a total of 7 – again enough to deal damage. The damage roll is a 3, plus the Damage Modifier of 2. The creature digs deep into Stig's internal organs, dropping his Health total from -2 to -7. He is now **seriously wounded** and thus unable to continue fighting. That puts Stig out of the fight. His Consciousness roll faces a Difficulty of 7, the absolute value of his Health pool. He could go even further into the red to strain for a bonus, but elects not to. There's no point in making the roll, which is guaranteed to fail. Stig passes out.

If Stig were alone as well as unconscious, the creature could and would proceed to finish him off, tearing him to bits. Fortunately for him, his friend Mitchell Blunt comes to help him, pounding on the hotel door. With its Scuffle down to 6, the creature doesn't feel up to a battle with a fresh opponent. As Blunt busts down the hotel door, it scuttles up through the window, leaving behind only a noxious stench as it disappears into the night.

Stig is seriously wounded and will die if not stabilized. Fortunately, Mitchell Blunt can stop the bleeding. A long convalescence now awaits the unlucky Stig.

Free-For-All Combat

Combat becomes more chaotic when two groups of combatants fight, or a group gangs up against a single opponent. The GM abandons the aggressor/defender model. Instead, the GM determines an order of action, ranking all participants in the combat according to their present *pool* values in the fighting skills they'll be starting the fight with—Scuffling or Shooting. Ties are broken in favor of characters with higher *ratings* in those skills. If characters are still tied, player characters win out over creatures and enemies, and early-arriving players win over late-arriving players.

The time it takes to go through the ranking order once, with each character taking an action, is called a **round**. When one round ends, another begins. When called upon to act, each character may strike at any opponent within range of his weapons. Some supernatural creatures may strike more than once per round. They make each attack in succession, and may divide them up between opponents within range, or concentrate all of them on a single enemy.

Creatures may choose to use their actions to deal additional damage to downed or helpless opponents rather than engage active opponents. They automatically deal once instance of damage per action. Only the most crazed and bestial human enemies engage in this behavior.

Characters who join a combat in progress come last in order of precedence. If more than two characters join during the same round, the GM determines their relative precedence using the rules above.

The fight continues until one side capitulates or flees, or all of its members are unconscious or otherwise unable to continue.

Armor

Armor may reduce the damage from certain weapon types. If you're wearing a form of armor effective against the weapon being used against you, you subtract a number of points from each instance of damage dealt to you before applying it to your Health pool. Light body armor, as worn by police officers, reduces each instance of damage from bullets by 2 points and from cutting and stabbing weapons (knives, swords, machetes) by 1 point. Military-grade body armor reduces bullet damage by 3 points.

Mitchell is shot by a street punk working as an unwitting dupe of the Esoterrorists. The GM rolls a 3 for the punk's damage, adding 1 point for his high-caliber handgun, for a total damage of 4. Mitchell wears light body armor, reducing the damage to 2 points. His Health pool decreases from 6 to 4.

Light body armor is heavy, hot, and marks you out as someone looking for trouble. All of these drawbacks apply doubly to military-grade body armor. Investigators can't expect to walk around openly wearing armor without attracting the attention of the local SWAT

team. Armor and heavy weapons may prove useful in discrete missions conducted away from prying eyes.

In choosing to make contemporary body armor highly effective against firearms, we're drawing on the portrayal of Kevlar vests in cop shows and movies. We make no claims for any resemblance between these rules and real life. The rules also favor close-up physical confrontations, which are more in keeping with the horror genre than firefights. GMs using the GUMSHOE rules in more realistic, horror-free investigative settings may wish to reduce the effectiveness of body armor against gunfire.

Creatures often have high armor ratings. They may possess hard, bony hides or monstrous anatomies that can take greater punishment than ordinary organisms. Most supernatural creatures are more resistant to bullets and other missile weapons than they are to blunt force trauma, slashes, and stab wounds.

Cover

In a typical gunfight, combatants seek cover, hiding behind walls, furniture or other barriers, exposing themselves only for the few seconds it takes them to pop up and fire a round at their targets. The GUMSHOE rules recognize three cover conditions:

EXPOSED

No barrier stands between you and the combatant firing at you. Your Hit Threshold decreases by 1.

PARTIAL COVER

About half of your body is exposed to fire. Your Hit Threshold remains unchanged.

FULL COVER

Except when you pop up to fire a round, the barrier completely protects you from incoming fire. Your Hit Threshold increases by 1.

One Gun, Two Combatants [optional]

If you are at the mercy of an opponent with gun well in hand and ready to fire, he can empty his entire clip or chamber at you before you get to him, or get yourself out of range. This situation occurs for example, if he holds you at gunpoint or charge him from more than five feet away with no cover. The Difficulty is 1 (an automatic hit), 2 if your Athletics rating is 8 or more and you are moving. He rolls one instance of damage, which is then tripled. Yes, we said tripled. And, yes, the tripling occurs after weapon modifiers are taken into account. This is why few unarmed people attack a gun-wielding opponent when he has the drop on them. If your opponent has a pistol but it is not well in hand and ready to fire, you may attempt to jump him and wrestle it from his grip. If he has a pistol well in hand but is unaware of your presence, you may also be able to jump him, at the GM's discretion. The characters engage in a Scuffling contest to see which of them gets control of the gun and fires it. The winner makes a damage roll against the loser, using the pistol's Damage Modifier, including the +2 for point blank range.

If you jump an opponent with an unready rifle, a Scuffling combat breaks out, with the opponent using the rifle as a heavy club.

Ammo Capacity

The Esoterrorists sets aside the loving attention to firearm intricacies characteristic of most contemporary-era RPG systems¹. For example, characters need reload only when dramatically appropriate. Otherwise, they're assumed to be able to refill the cylinders of their revolvers or jam clips into their automatic weapons between shots.

When reloading is an issue, GMs may request a Shooting test (Difficulty 3) to quickly reload. Characters who fail may not use their Shooting ability to attack during the current round.

Separated from his teammates, a wounded Mitchell crawls into a condemned tenement to hole up. Unfortunately for him, the building is inhabited by a passel of the supernatural creatures called kooks. The GM decides that limited resources will increase the sequence's sense of terror, and declares that Mitchell has only four shots left in his Glock autopistol, and only one extra ammo clip in his pocket. She plans to have the kooks gang up on him, forcing him to roll Guns to successfully reload as they rush him.

Range

The effect of range on firearms combat is likewise simplified nearly out of existence. Handguns and shotguns can only be accurately fired at targets within fifty meters. The range limit for rifles is one hundred meters.

Stability Tests

Even non-supernatural effects often prove emotionally destabilizing. Every violent encounter puts you at risk for Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Any confrontation with the supernatural threatens a complete psychotic break, manifesting as a bizarre detachment from reality.

When an incident forces challenges your fragile sanity, make a Stability test against a Difficulty Number of 4.

If you fail, you lose a number of Stability points. The severity of the loss depends on the situation. As with any other test of a general ability, you are always permitted to spend Stability points to provide a bonus to your roll. However, it's never a good bet to spend more points than you stand to lose if you fail².

GMs should feel free to assess Stability Losses for other incidents, using the examples provided as a benchmark. Some especially overwhelming creatures may impose higher than normal Stability losses when seen from a distance, seen up close, or ripping your lungs out.

¹Should demand warrant, crunchier combat rules may be issued in a subsequent supplement.

²If you think it's not worth spending points to add to your rolls in cases where you stand to lose only a small amount of Stability, you're right. Players should save them for the really devastating traumas that surely await them later in the scenario, where a modest points expenditure can save you from a much larger loss.

Here's a Stability test in action:

Stig's current Stability is 8. While maintaining surveillance on a farm subject to crop circle manifestations, he sees a blurry, inhuman figure through his night vision goggles. Like any other Stability test, Stig's player, Justin, will be trying to beat a Difficulty of 4. Confident that this long-distance sighting constitutes only a minor brush with destabilizing weirdness, Justin elects to spend only 1 point to bolster his roll. Alas, he rolls a 1, for a result of 2, two lower than the Difficulty Number. Having failed, he suffers a Stability loss of 3. Having spent 1 point on his bonus and lost another 3 to the failure, Stig's new Stability pool value is 4.

Characters make a single roll per incident, based on its highest potential Stability loss.

Stig and his teammate Kacie are poring through a flooded basement looking for evidence. Animated corpses pop up from beneath the water to attack them. Stig drives off the creatures, but not before they tear Kacie open in front of his eyes, looping their rotten arms through her entrails. His player, Justin, makes a single roll, with a potential Stability Loss of 8, the worst of several pertaining to the incident.

INCIDENT	STABILITY LOSS
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to do serious harm	2
You are in a car or other vehicle accident serious enough to pose a risk of injury	2
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to kill	3
You see a supernatural creature from a distance	3
You see a supernatural creature up close	4
You see a particularly grisly murder or accident scene	4
You learn that a friend or loved one has been violently killed	4
You discover the corpse of a friend or loved one	6
You are attacked by a supernatural creature	7
You see a friend or loved one killed	7
You see a friend killed or loved one in a particularly gruesome manner	8



JEROME 06

Groups craving an additional point of complexity can occasionally alter Difficulty Numbers for Stability tests depending on the character's attitude toward the destabilizing event. Characters who would logically be inured to a given event face a Difficulty of 3, while those especially susceptible face a 5. A character whose daytime identity is that of a surgeon or coroner might, for example, face a lowered Difficulty when encountering gruesomely mutilated bodies. A stock car racer would get a better chance against car accidents. No character type gets a break when encountering supernatural creatures.

LOSING IT

Like Health, your Stability pool can drop below 0.

If your Stability ranges from 0 to -5, you are **shaken**. You can still do your job, but seem distracted. You can't spend points from the pools of your Investigative abilities. Difficulty Numbers for all general abilities increase by 1.

If your Stability ranges from -6 to -11, you acquire a **mental illness**. This stays with you even after your Stability pool is restored to normal. See below for more. You also continue to suffer the ill effects of being shaken. Furthermore, you permanently lose 1 point from your Stability *rating*. The only way to get it back is to purchase it again with build points.

When your Stability reaches -12 or less, you are **incurably insane**. You may commit one last crazy act, which must either be self-destructively heroic or self-destructively destructive. Or you may choose merely to gibber and drool. Assuming you survive your permanent journey to the shores of madness, your character is quietly shipped off to a secure Ordo Veritatis psych facility, never to be seen again. Time to create a new character.

MENTAL ILLNESS

If the incident that drove you to mental illness was mundane in nature, you suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD.) You are haunted by dreams of the incident, and spend your days in a constant state of anxiety and alert, as if prepared for it to repeat itself at any moment. Whenever your senses register any input reminding you of the incident, you must make a Stability test (Difficulty 4) or freeze up. If you freeze up, you are unable to take any action for fifteen minutes and remain **shaken** (see above) for twenty-four hours after that. Tests to see if you show symptoms of PTSD do not in and of themselves lower your Stability pool.

Tediously Obligatory Disclaimer

This game simulates mental illness as seen in pop culture, especially the horror genre. It should not be confused with real psychology. Although no disrespect is intended to those suffering the real-life effects of mental illness, we submit to those concerned by this issue that horror is meant to be irresponsible, disreputable, and upsetting.

If driven to mental illness by a supernatural occurrence, you face a range of possible mental disorders. The GM rolls on the following chart or chooses a disorder based on the triggering circumstance. The player is then sent out of the room, while the GM and other players collaborate on a way to heighten his sense of dislocation and disorientation.

1. **Delusion.** The other players and GM decide on a mundane detail of the world which is no longer true and has never been true. For example, there might be no such thing as a squirrel, a Volkswagen, or orange juice. Maybe John Lennon was never assassinated, or never existed in the first place. PCs and supporting characters deny knowledge of the chosen item, person, or event.
2. **Homicidal Mania.** The GM takes the player aside, tells him that he knows one of the other players is a supernatural creature, and tells him just how to kill the monster.
3. **Megalomania.** When the character fails at a dramatic moment, the GM describes the outcome of his ability attempt as successful, then asks the player to leave the room. Then the GM describes the real results to the other players, and invites the megalomaniac player back into the room.
4. **Multiple Personality Disorder.** At moments of stress, another player is assigned control of the character, speaking and acting as if he's an entirely different person.
5. **Paranoia.** The other players are instructed to act as if they're trying to keep straight faces when the affected player returns. Occasionally they exchange notes, make hand signals to the GM, or use meaningless code words, as if communicating something important the player is unaware of.
6. **Selective Amnesia.** The group decides on an event that did happen in the world that the player has now forgotten all about. He's married, or killed someone, or pseudonymously written a best-selling book. Everyone he meets refers to this new, verifiable fact that he has no knowledge of.

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRIAGE

A character with the Shrink ability can spend points from that pool to help another character regain spent Stability points. For every Shrink point spent, the recipient gains 2 Stability points.

If a character is acting in an erratic manner due to mental illness, a another character can spend 2 points of Shrink to snap him into a state of temporary lucidity. He will then act rationally for the remainder of the current scene.

HEAD GAMES

Mental illness can be cured through prolonged treatment using the Shrink ability. At the beginning of each scenario, in a prologue scene preceding the main action, the character administering the treatment makes a Shrink test (Difficulty 4.) After three consecutive successful tests, and three consecutive scenarios in which the patient remains above 0 Stability at all times, the mental illness goes away.

However, if the character ever again acquires a mental illness, he regains the condition he was previously cured of. Permanent cure then becomes impossible.

A successful Shrink test undertaken during the course of a scenario suppresses its symptoms until the patient next suffers a Stability loss.

Regaining Pool Points

Spent points from various pools are restored at different rates, depending on their narrative purpose.

Investigative ability pools are restored only at the end of each case, without regard to the amount of time that passes in the game world. Players seeking to marshal their resources may ask you how long cases typically run, in real time. Most groups finish scenarios over 2-3 sessions. Players may revise their sense of how carefully to manage point spending as they see how quickly their group typically disposes of its cases.

(GMs running extremely long, multi-part investigations may designate certain story events as breakpoints where all investigative pools are refreshed. For example, a globe-hopping investigation where the team meets a separate team of Esoterrorists enemies in five different locales might allow refreshment of investigative pools after each group of enemies is neutralized.)

Use of the Shrink ability permits limited recovery of Stability points in the course of an episode. Full refreshment occurs between cases. It is possible only when the character is able to spend calm, undisturbed quality time with friends and loved ones uninvolved in the shadowy world of the Ordo Veritatis. In campaigns where the teammates' personal lives are a matter of background detail only, refreshment automatically occurs between episodes.

GMs who wish to add a soap opera element to their campaigns, in which the characters must balance the everyday pressures of ordinary life against their activities as covert battlers of the supernatural, can complicate this process. In this campaign type, the characters must work to keep their support networks intact. If they fail, they regain no Stability between episodes. As part of the character creation process, players must detail their network of friends and loved ones in a paragraph or two of background text, which is then submitted to the GM for approval.

The Health pool refreshes over time, at a rate of 2 points per day of restful activity. (Wounded characters heal at a different rate, over a period of hospitalization; see p. 37.) Use of the Medic ability can restore a limited number of Health points in the course of a session.

Pools for the physical abilities of Athletics, Driving, Scuffling, and Shooting are fully restored whenever twenty-four hours of game-world time elapses since the last

expenditure. The remaining general abilities refresh at the end of each case, like investigative abilities.

Improving Your Character

At the end of each investigation, each player gets 2 build points for each session they participated in. (This assumes a small number of 3-4 hour sessions; if you play in shorter bursts, modify accordingly.) Players who had characters die in the course of the investigation only get points for each session involving their current character.

These build points can be spent to increase either investigative or general abilities. You may acquire new abilities or bolster existing ones. If necessary to preserve credibility, rationalize new abilities as areas of expertise you've had all along, but are only revealing later in the series.



What Do Pool Points Represent?

Pool points are a literary abstraction, representing the way that each character gets his or her own time in the spotlight in the course of an ensemble drama. When you do something remarkable, you expend a little bit of your spotlight time. More active players will spend their points sooner than less demonstrative ones, unless they carefully pick and choose their moments to shine.

Remember, all characters are remarkably competent. Pool points measure your opportunities to exercise this ultra-competence during any given scenario.

Pool points do not represent a resource, tangible or otherwise, in the game world. Players are aware of them, but characters are not. The team members' ignorance of them is analogous to TV characters' obliviousness to commercial breaks, the unwritten rules of scene construction, and the tendency of events to heat up during sweeps.

We represent this most purely in the case of investigative skills, which are the core of the game. Their refreshment is tied to a purely fictional construct, the length of the episode.

However, where a pool could be seen to correspond to a resource perceptible to the characters, we handle refreshment in a somewhat more realistic, if also abstract, manner. Characters' ebbing Health scores are perceptible to the characters in the form of welts, cuts, pain, and general fatigue. Stability is less tangible but can be subjectively measured in the characters' moods and reactions. Physical abilities, also tied to fatigue and sharpness of reflexes, are also handled with a nod to the demands of realism.